

Sweet Sleep

May 5, 2008

An essential part of a healthy lifestyle includes getting a good night's sleep. The quality and quantity of your sleep affects how you feel physically, your relationships, your productivity – even your quality of life. Sleep needs to be a health priority. This year, May is recognized as Better Sleep Month.

The average person needs 7-8 hours of sleep each night, but individual needs can vary from as much as 10 hours per night to much less. If you are sleeping more on the weekends than you do during the week or if you find yourself tired or wanting to nap during the day, you probably aren't getting enough deep, restful sleep during the night.

A poor night's sleep can lead to trouble concentrating, irritability, more mistakes and increased stress. Cornell psychology professor and author of *Power Sleep: The Revolutionary Program that Prepares Your Mind for Peak Performance*, James B. Maas, says if you get less than eight hours of sleep a night, you are operating impaired. He adds that your alertness, productivity and creativity, and general health are all affected.

Maas says one-third of all Americans get six hours of sleep a night or less when they should be getting nine or 10. "If we can get people sleeping eight hours, that would be wonderful, although still not optimal," Maas says. "Between the seventh and eighth hour is when we get almost an hour of REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, the time when the mind repairs itself, grows new connections and puts it all together. REM sleep occurs about every 90 minutes, and the periods of REM sleep get longer as the night progresses. If you're a six-hour sleeper, you're missing that last, important opportunity to repair and to prepare for the coming day."

To get better sleep and improve your quality of life, follow these suggestions from the National Sleep Foundation.

- Maintain a regular bed and wake time schedule, including weekends.
- Establish a regular, relaxing bedtime routine such as soaking in a hot bath or hot tub and then reading a book or listening to soothing music.
- Create a sleep-conducive environment that is dark, quiet, comfortable and cool.
- Sleep on a comfortable mattress and pillows.
- Use your bedroom only for sleep and sex. It is best to take work materials, computers and televisions out of the sleeping environment.
- Finish eating at least two to three hours before your regular bedtime.
- Exercise regularly. It is best to complete your workout at least a few hours before bedtime.
- Avoid nicotine (e.g., cigarettes, tobacco products). Used close to bedtime, it can lead to poor sleep.
- Avoid caffeine (e.g., coffee, tea, soft drinks, chocolate) close to bedtime. It can keep you awake.
- Avoid alcohol close to bedtime. It can lead to disrupted sleep later in the night.

For more information on developing good sleep habits, call the Springfield-Greene County Health Department at (417) 864-1658 or visit the National Sleep Foundation online at www.sleepfoundation.org.